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The influence of cultural diversity on project management competence development – the Mediterranean experience

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Abstract

In the last few decades project management gained popularity in all types of organizations across many industries and increasing number of projects, programs and portfolios are professionally managed. Therefore, competent project managers and associates who can cope with problems that are occurring became the ultimate need of the business entity. However, project management competencies as a set of knowledge, personal behavior, skills and experience are very complex and therefore require acquiring a variety of elements within three different areas: contextual, behavioral and technical. Further, in order to assess and develop or improve relevant project management competencies, a system for assessment was developed and levels of competences defined within certification process. Also, considering that certification can contribute to project success by ensuring that project managers and associates have adequate competencies for managing projects, programs and portfolios, as well to integrate, plan and control the schedule-intense and unique efforts to improve overall organizational performance, authors of this paper examine the interest for project management certification in the Mediterranean countries – Croatia, Italy, Portugal and Spain. The focus of the research is on the influence of a particular culture on the attitude regarding the project management competence, so as competence-based certification. This paper therefore describes initial results on relations and influences among competence, certification, culture and business practices. The findings are based on the data provided by the national project management associations, the obtained results about the relationship among cultural characteristics, competences in project management and project success are discussed and will be used as the foundation for further research in this field.

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Keywords: project management; competence; certification; Mediterranean countries; culture

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1. Introduction to project management certification

The use of project management practices in today's fast changing working environment has dramatically increased. A large number of companies adopted project management methodologies and processes in order to deliver work packages in a more cost-conscious and controlled way, as well as to make the best use of their limited human resources to create competitive advantage and meet customer requirements (Fisher, 2011). Project management has been viewed as the new form of general management which enables organizations to integrate, plan and control schedule-intensive and unique endeavors in order to improve the overall organizational performance. Project-based workplaces are characterized by a short-term interaction and involvement and are particularly challenging for the individuals charged with managing performance within them. And since more organizations accept project management as their modus operandi to deliver work packages, the need for competent project managers who can face the challenges of implementing their projects despite uncertainty, diversity and great amount of potentially relevant information, grows as well (Cheng, Dainty, Moore, 2005). The job of the project manager is demanding, complex and requires dealing with several issues concurrently (Pant, Baroudi, 2008), so the competence of project manager is a factor in successful delivery of projects, but also the prerequisite in those areas that have the most impact on successful outcomes (Crawford, 2000). Project managers should be able to get things done through a large and diverse set of people, despite having little direct control over most of them. Therefore, knowing what they do and what kind of skills they demonstrate would constitute a very important step for the selection and development of an effective project manager to cope with every problem and accomplish unique outcomes with limited resources and within limited time constraints (El-Sabaa, 2001). Also, as project management is a complex process that targets multiple outcomes, competency in project management is also complex and requires the acquisition of a variety of knowledge and skill sets in different areas of expertise such as instructional technology, management, IT, engineering and manufacturing (Brill, Bishop, Walker, 2006) in combination with personal characteristics and relevant experience (Boyatzis, 1982). To allow measuring and development of such competence, it has been broken down into competence ranges that represent dimensions which together describe the function and are more or less independent. Each range contains competence elements that cover the most important competence aspects in the particular range and every competence element in each range is described in terms of the knowledge and experience required (Chaupin et al., 2006). Further, although traditional project management competencies are critical for project success, communication between team members and all stakeholders is vital to support the shared understanding of the project and its goals. Consequently, managing projects successfully requires a mixture of skills including interpersonal ability, technical competencies, cognitive aptitude and capability to understand the situation and people in order to dynamically integrate appropriate leadership behaviors (Pant, Baroudi, 2008). The concern of project managers' competence resulted in the interest for the development of standards and certification processes that can be used for assessment, recognition or as a guide for development of project management competence. However, not enough attention has been given to the role of project manager and the issues he/she have to face since project organizations tend to revolve around the fluid interaction of highly skilled personnel at various organizational levels (Wilemon, Cicero, 1970). Interest in the role of project manager and the aspects of competence in that role can be traced back to Gaddis (1959) and Lawrence and Lorsch (1967). The primary research on the subject began in the 1970's based on the investigation done by Thamhain, Gemmill and Wilemon (1974) into the skills and performance of the project manager and contributions to the understanding of the project management competence made by Posner (1987), Pettersen (1991), Ford and McLaughin (1992), Zimmerer and Yasin (1998). Today's standards include primarily what project managers are expected to know or are able to do and the process of developing such standards involved extensive consultation with the industry, as well as participation of experienced project management staff in identifying key competencies (Crawford, 2000). A standard of competence for project management has been mentioned for the first time in the 1980s, the first International Competence Baseline was introduced in the 1990s (Nahod, Vukomanić, Radujković, 2013) and to date, many institutions and authors offer educational and certification programs in project management, with different project management competencies (e.g. Mantel et al., Katz, Sabaa, Loo, Turner, Belzer, Wysocki etc.). However, all certification programs for project managers have the task to identify the best qualified individuals and organizations in the area of project management at the national and international market and certificate should prove qualifications and empower holder to perform tasks in the field (Radujković, 2000). As the result, the organizations should make the commitment to improve their

project manager development and select the certification process that is aligned with the goals of the business to achieve sustained project success (Carbone, Gholston, 2004). Since the main interest of the paper was to examine types and levels of international certification among project management professionals in different countries, as well as similarities and differences between them, the authors chose for the research one of the most appreciated and widespread international certificate process based on the International Competence Baseline (ICB 3.0) for its international foundation, worldwide acceptance and applicability. According to Competence Baseline, competencies are divided into technical which describe the fundamental project management competence elements, behavioral which describe the personal project management competence elements and situational competencies which describe the project management competence elements related to the context of the project. They encompass 46 elements (20 technical, 15 behavioral and 11 contextual) which should increase the success of projects and the way they are managed (Pant, Baroudi, 2008). This means that there must be space to add a national section per competence element, as well as to add extra competence elements to reflect any cultural differences. Project management personnel should be able to manage successfully in other organizations, other sectors of the economy and in other countries. The certificates are awarded to individuals based on the assessment of their competences in typical daily project management activities and are divided into four levels of competence (Chaupin et al., 2006):

- Level A – Certified Project Director, which proves that the person is able to direct an important portfolio or program with the corresponding resources, methodologies and tools
- Level B - Certified Senior Project Manager, which proves that the person is able to manage a complex project according to defined criteria
- Level C - Certified Project Manager, which proves that the person is able to lead a project with limited complexity and can demonstrate the corresponding level of experience in addition to the ability to apply project management knowledge
- Level D - Certified Project Management Associate, which proves that the person is able to apply project management knowledge when he/she participates in a project in any role, however common knowledge he/she has is not sufficient to perform at a satisfactory level of competence.

The certification process according to ICB started in 1998, and over the last seven years a significant rise in the number of certified project, program and portfolio managers and associates on projects can be seen. In the period from 2007 to 2014 the total increase in the number of certified project managers according to the ICB amounts to 205.48% and according to the defined levels of competence it is clear that the number of certified professionals at:

- level A – increased 396.54%
- level B – increased 184.52%
- level C – increased 186.91%
- level D – increased 215.08%.

Overall, the data on the number of certificated professionals point to the increased awareness of the importance of certification in order to adequately assess and then prove project management competencies while searching for the job in the field or finding new challenges and advancement opportunities. However, although the number of certified project professionals significantly increased worldwide, there is still a question how much each included country participates in the process and are there differences between countries, as well as the levels obtained in the various industries within countries. The results of the research on cultural clusters and development of competencies in project management are shown in detail in the next two chapters.

2. The cultural clusters and project management certification

Although it has been visible that project management practices are becoming increasingly important in modern business, they are significantly diverse between countries, and project managers often lead similar project in a completely different way. The distinction may result from cultural differences, as well as various criteria defined to measure project success (Zwikael, Shimizu, Globerson, 2005). The efforts to identify clusters of societies by using

the analysis of international-level data have been actual for more than 50 years (Hofstede, 1980; Ronen, Shenkar, 1985; Tixier, 1994). Since the 1990s, the Global leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) project included more than 200 researchers worldwide investigating complex effects of culture on leadership and organizational effectiveness, as well as cultural drivers for economic competitiveness of societies and many aspects of human condition (Dorfman et al., 2012). Resulting clusters provide important information regarding societal variation and are useful to summarize intercultural similarities and differences. They may also be used for defining the sampling strategy for cross-cultural research to ensure that an adequate sampling of cultural variability is included in the samples and to test the generalizability of empirical findings between countries (Gupta, Hanges, Dorfman, 2002). In the process of grouping countries into similar clusters, three major criteria have been used (Furnham, Kirkcaldy, Lynn, 1994; Portes, Zhou, 1994; Cattell, 1950): 1) geographic proximity, 2) mass migrations and ethnic social capital and 3) religious and linguistic commonalities. However, other variables like societal and psychological (attitudes, values, work goals), degree of modernity, economic and socio-political development (income per capita, public health care) have been used, as well (Haire, Ghiselli, Porter, 1966; Ronen, Shenkar, 1985; Chemers, 1997; Brodbeck et al., 2000). Nine cultural dimensions were created based on theoretical, statistical and qualitative considerations and according to them countries were assessed (Dorfman et al., 2012):

- power distance – the degree to which members of a collective expect power to be distributed equally
- uncertainty avoidance – the extent to which a society, organization or a group relies on social norms, rules and procedures to alleviate unpredictability of future events
- humane orientation – the degree to which a collective encourages and rewards individuals for being fair, altruistic, generous, caring and kind to others
- institutional collectivism – the degree to which organizational and societal institutional practices encourage and reward collective distribution of resources and collective action
- in-group collectivism – the degree to which individuals express pride, loyalty and cohesiveness in organizations and families
- assertiveness – the degree to which individuals are assertive, confrontational and aggressive in their relationships with others
- gender egalitarianism – the degree to which a collective minimizes gender inequality
- future orientation – the extent to which individuals engage in future-oriented behaviors (e.g. planning)
- performance orientation – the degree to which a collective encourages and rewards group members for performance improvement and excellence.

This process resulted in defining 10 main clusters: Anglo Cultures, Latin Europe, Nordic Europe, Germanic Europe, Eastern Europe, Latin America, Sub-Sahara, Arab Cultures, Southern Asia and Confucian Asia (Gupta, Hanges, Dorfman, 2002). For the purposes of the comparative analysis in this paper, the authors focused on the clusters of European countries by including into the research only those countries which have a National association for project management that is a part of the International Project Management Association. Authors also included Croatia into the Latin Europe cluster since, according to its geographic, as well as demographic and value characteristics it is similar to the countries comprising that cluster and is one of the Mediterranean countries. According to the defined criteria, the Germanic cluster includes Austria, Germany, Netherlands and Switzerland. The Netherlands, although would typically be a part of the Nordic Europe cluster, according to GLOBE research showed similarities with the German-speaking countries (Dorfman et al., 2012). This cluster is characterized with high practices on uncertainty avoidance, power distance, assertiveness, performance and future orientation, as well as relatively low practices on institutional and in-group collectivism, gender egalitarianism and humane orientation (Szabo et al., 2002; Gupta, Hanges, Dorfman, 2002). The Nordic cluster includes Denmark, Finland and Sweden. It shows moderately strong practices on uncertainty avoidance, future orientation, institutional collectivism, gender egalitarianism and humane orientation, and lower practices on in-group collectivism, performance orientation, power distance and assertiveness. This cluster is culturally most similar to Germanic cluster (Gupta, Hanges, Dorfman, 2002). The Latin Europe Cluster (Mediterranean countries) includes Croatia, France, Italy, Portugal and Spain. It is characterized by high practices on power distance and relatively high on in-group collectivism. The moderate practices are on uncertainty avoidance, humane and performance orientation, institutional collectivism, assertiveness and low practices on gender egalitarianism and future orientation (Jesuino, 2002). Anglo cultures

include Ireland and UK and tend to be characterized by high practices on power distance, moderate on uncertainty avoidance, humane orientation, institutional and in-group collectivism, assertiveness, future and performance orientation and low on gender egalitarianism (Ashkanasy, Trevor-Roberts, Earnshaw, 2002). Eastern Europe cluster includes Greece, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Poland, Russia and Slovenia. It is characterized by high practices on in-group collectivism and power distance, medium on humane and performance orientation and institutional collectivism, and low on uncertainty avoidance, future orientation, gender egalitarianism and assertiveness (Bakacsi, Sándor, András, Viktor, 2002). If the share of the European clusters in the total number of certified professionals according to International Competence Baseline (ICB) is considered, it can be seen that it comprises 68.69%. Germanic Europe cluster is leading in project management certification with 34.01%, followed by Anglo cluster with 25.02% and Nordic Europe with 6.67%. Latin Europe with the total of 2.93% presents a small fraction of the total percentage of certification and the Eastern Europe is at the bottom with only 0.056% (Table 1).

Table 1. Percent of certification according to ICB in clusters

Germanic Europe	% of certification according to ICB	Nordic Europe	% of certification according to ICB	Anglo Cluster	% of certification according to ICB	Latin Europe	% of certification according to ICB	Eastern Europe	% of certification according to ICB
Austria	6.20	Denmark	2.83	Ireland	1.38	Croatia	0.30	Hungary	0.045
Germany	17.44	Finland	2.25	UK	23.64	France	1.12	Russia	0.012
Netherlands	4.90	Sweden	1.59			Italy	0.47	Kazakhstan	0.004
Switzerland	5.47					Portugal	0.70	Slovenia	0.002
						Spain	0.34	Poland	0.021
								Greece	0.0004
TOTAL	34.01		6.67		25.02		2.93		0.042

Source: authors according to IPMA Certification Validation Management Board, 2014

As the focus of this paper is on the Latin Europe cluster (Mediterranean countries, to exam the specificities of development of competence in project management and certification process in more detail, further research was done and has been shown in the third chapter.

3. Project Management competence in the Mediterranean countries – research methodology and findings

Latin Europe may be in a way considered to be “the cradle” of Europe since many researchers agree on the fact that the Mediterranean is the place where it all started and that Europe is a result of the triple heritage: Athens, Rome and Jerusalem. Latin European cluster is unique for its paternalistic role attributed to the state which should regulate, educate and protect (Jesuino, 2002). As it could be seen from the table in the previous chapter (Table1), Latin European cluster participates with 2.93% in the total number of certified professionals according to International Competence Baseline (ICB). In detail, France is leading with 1.12%, and is followed by Portugal with 0.7%, Italy 0.47%, Spain 0.34% and Croatia 0.3%. Although in France is an National Association for Project Management which is a part of International project Management Association, it did not participate in this iteration of the research and the authors suggest its inclusion in the next iteration to obtain a more complete view of the certification process in the Mediterranean countries. If this data is observed in relation to the population in the country, it can be seen that Croatia has the highest percentage of certified professionals in the total population (0.016%), and is followed by Portugal (0.015%), Italy and Spain (0.002%) (Table2). However, if the comparison is made according to the population, situation is quite different. There are the most certified professionals in Portugal (156 000), followed by Italy (122 600), Spain (93 200) and Croatia (68 800).

Table 2. Percent of certification according to ICB (Latin Europe cluster)

Country	Population (mil.)	GDP (bil.)	GDP per capita (USD)	GDP as share of world total (%)	% of certificated professionals in the total population
Croatia	4.3	58.1	13 562	0.09	0.016
Italy	61.3	2072.0	34 715	2.08	0.002
Portugal	10.4	220.0	20 728	0.28	0.015
Spain	46.6	1358.7	29 150	1.60	0.002

Source: authors according to Schwab, K. (ed.) (2014) and data collected by empirical research

Further, if the total number of certified professionals in the country is divided by levels of competence, it can be seen that in Croatia are 1.08% level A professionals, 9.74% level B professionals, 34.63% level C professionals and 54.55% level D professionals, in Italy are 3.2% level A professionals, 15.5% level B professionals, 35.5% level C professionals and 45.8% level D professionals, in Portugal are 0.38% level A professionals, 1.62% level B professionals, 13.93% level C professionals and 84.07% level D professionals, and in Spain are 1.04% level A professionals, 7.06% level B professionals, 21.07% level C professionals and 70.83% level D professionals (Table3). As expected, the largest number of individuals has been certified for the Level D, and the reason behind could be found in the increasing number of formal education programs in the field of project management and increased interest of the students for this field. Therefore, the authors also propose for the next iteration of the research a further investigation of the quantity and quality of formal project management curricula within countries and their relationship with the certification process, as well as the examination of the structure of certified professionals at this level.

Table 3. Percent of certification according to ICB and levels of competence (Latin Europe cluster)

Level of certification	Croatia	Italy	Portugal	Spain
A	1.08%	3.20%	0.38%	1.04%
B	9.74%	15.50%	1.62%	7.06%
C	34.63%	35.50%	13.93%	21.07%
D	54.55%	45.80%	84.07%	70.83%

Source: authors according to IPMA Certification Validation Management Board, 2014

Finally, after dividing the total number of certified professionals according to levels of competence and industries in which they are certified, diverse results are obtained. In Croatia, the most certified professionals come from student population (31.76%) and are exclusively certified for the level D. In Engineering & Construction have been certified 27.38% professionals, most of them for the level C (15.30%), and a smaller fraction in Banking (11%), Consultancy (10.8%) and Pharmaceuticals (1.5%). Certified professionals for the level A can be found only in Engineering & construction (0.8%), Banking and Consultancy (0.2%). In Italy, the largest number of certified professionals is in the Manufacturing (29.85%), followed by ICT (25.25%), EPC Oil & Gas (15%) and Aerospace/Defense (13.35%). The column Other includes a large percentage and is comprised of students and all other industries in a smaller part. In Italy is also very interesting to notice that it is the only country that has certified professionals in all mentioned industries at all four level of competence. In Portugal, ICT industry is dominant with 74.72%, however, with the most professionals certified for the level D (60.65%). The second industry is Construction with significantly smaller fraction (9.67%), third Training/Consulting (7.16%), fourth Transportation (7.16%) and last Energy (0.52%). All the other industries comprise 2.79% of all certified professionals. In Spain, as in Croatia, the most certified professionals come from student population (30.01%) and are mostly certified for level D (28.7%). The dominant industry is Engineering and Construction Projects (17.28) closely followed by ICT (17.21%) and University teaching/R&D (16.07%). Smaller shares have Manufacturing (7.77%), Consultancy (5.98%), Administration Public Sector (2.89%) and Building & Real Estate (2.79%). The only overlap between industries in all four Mediterranean countries is ICT industry with certified professionals at all four levels, with medium or high share in total (17.21%-74.72%) and in three countries is present a Consultancy industry, with certified professionals at levels B, C and D. Other professionals are divided among industries specific for each country. Therefore, at the end, in the next iterations of the research authors would be very interested to have a further investigation of the differences among industries, as well as representation of industries between countries and share each industry holds in the national GDP in relation to the distribution of certified professionals. Also, they would like to assess in more detail cultural diversity in relation to industry dominance in countries, first Mediterranean, then in comparison to other European clusters and the relation between cultural diversity and joining the certification process at different levels and in different periods of professional project management career.

4. Conclusion

Since the main interest of the paper was to examine types and levels of international certification among project management professionals in different countries, and the similarities and differences between them, the authors

chose for the research one of the most appreciated and widespread international certificate process based on the International Competence Baseline (ICB 3.0). The certification process according to ICB started in 1998, and over the last seven years a significant rise in the number of certified project, program and portfolio managers and associates on projects can be seen. Key findings from the research convey that there are observable similarities and differences among clusters of countries according to cultural dimensions, but also countries in the same cluster and certification in the field of project management. However, general idea presented in this paper has to be tested further to give a rise to a more detailed and developed theory of project management and project management competence. Studies may be undertaken in a number of countries, industries and academia and in relation to industry share in the national GDP with cultural diversity as the main predictor of attitude similarities and differences towards joining certification process and using project management in general.

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